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and

BONNEVILLE POWER ADMINISTRATION

(DOE/EA-1932)

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND DECISION NOTICE
FOR THE SOUTH FORK OF COAL CREEK
HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

July 1, 2013

Decision Summary:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) will proceed with implementation of the proposed habitat enhancement in the South Fork of Coal Creek, a tributary of the North Fork Flathead River. See the decision notice at end for complete details.

Project Proposal and Justification:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) will implement a project to increase available spawning and rearing habitat for westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout by adding large, woody debris into an impaired section of the South Fork of Coal Creek, a tributary to the North Fork of the Flathead River. This portion of the drainage has been historically degraded by human activities that have limited recruitment of habitat structures and features beneficial to fish in all life stages. Large wood structures are important components of fish habitat, providing cover and flow refuge for young fish, while creating pools and recruiting spawning gravel for adults. Large wood aggregates will be constructed with locally imported, whole trees passively anchored to emulate natural habitat arrays found in other sections of Coal Creek.

A fish and habitat assessment has been performed in the proposed enhancement reach for comparison to posttreatment conditions. A reference reach (located in a similar, local stream that is not impaired) has been selected for additional pre- and posttreatment comparisons, and monitoring will continue to evaluate short- and long-term impacts of enhancement (one, three, and five years posttreatment, minimum). Monitoring will consist of quantifying project objectives, including pool frequency and diversity; substrate characteristics; channel roughness; large, woody debris retention; and estimates of fish abundance and age classes.

Environmental and Social Impacts of Project:

A spyder backhoe will be used to place large trees throughout the proposed project area. Downed trees with and without attached root wads will be selected from the nearby Sun Dog Fire (2006) area and flown by helicopter to the stream bank. No trees will be removed from the project site's riparian area. Minor and temporary disturbance to riparian soil may occur during the placement of large wood; however, FWP anticipates any short-term impacts will not produce detrimental or lasting effects on stream or riparian productivity. The use of a helicopter to move wood from nearby timber stands to the stream channel will further minimize erosion and compaction of soil.

The action of importing trees into the riparian area and stream channel will likely change deposition and erosion dynamics within the stream, influencing pool development and long-term maintenance as well as gravel distribution. These impacts are consistent with the goal and objectives of the proposed action, creating complex aquatic habitat benefiting fish at multiple life stages. Structures will be designed to promote channel scour, gravel deposition, and retention of LWD. Changes in siltation will only be visible while construction is taking place and will be minimized by the type of equipment used (i.e., spyder backhoe and helicopter) and time of year (i.e., base flows). Air quality should not be adversely affected beyond minor exhaust emissions and dust associated with small scale construction activities.

Several measures will be implemented to reduce construction-related turbidity. Construction will take place during low flows, and minimal excavation to the stream banks and streambed are proposed. Structures will be mainly anchored by wedging large woody debris (LWD) pieces between stable points on the bank (e.g., mature trees, rock outcrops, existing wood), producing minimal channel or stream bank disturbance. The project will be monitored for impacts during and after construction. FWP does not anticipate that the proposed project will affect a designated floodplain. Large wood structures will extend no more than 50 feet into the floodplain, which has been measured at 65 feet. The proposed project is on undeveloped U.S. Forest Service land, so threats to people or property related to water hazards are not applicable.

Noxious weeds are a common concern anytime soil is disturbed. The primary potential source of noxious weeds involving the proposed project would be from the spyder backhoe. To mitigate that potential, the spyder will be clean and free of weeds prior to site arrival. Any increase in the presence of noxious weeds at the project site will be addressed with appropriate remedial actions.

The proposed project is intended to improve habitat for bull trout and other fish species in SFCC. In-stream work will be performed between July 8 and September 1 to protect bull trout eggs, fry, and spawning from the project activities. Secondary impacts include increasing available spawning, rearing, and overwintering habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, potentially increasing abundances and system carrying capacity for the species through time. Fish and wildlife biologists with the U.S. Forest Service will be evaluating the potential impacts the project would have on grizzly bears and other threatened or endangered species, cavity nesters, and old growth nesters; however, the agency determined that no negative impacts would result from the nearby enhancement completed in 2008 (Forest Service decision memo, June 18, 2007). The proposed project would not proceed without approval from U.S. Forest Service biologists.

All equipment would be well maintained and cleaned of hydraulic fluids and similar contaminants prior to use in construction. A petroleum spill kit would be available on-site to contain any spills, though unlikely to occur. No additional chemicals will be applied or used during implementation of this project. Construction activities will occur in remote locations. Risks to human health are primarily limited to potential physical injury to

workers during construction. This potential is reduced by pretreatment safety and response instruction and training that each worker involved will be required to undergo. First aid kits will be readily accessible on-site, and a satellite phone will be available for emergency use.

U.S. Forest Service archeologists have no records of human prehistoric evidence on the project site. In the event that archeological material is encountered during the implementation of this project, work will be halted until it can be inspected and assessed by an archeologist.

Public Involvement:

In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, an environmental assessment (EA) was prepared and circulated for public comment from June 7 through June 28, 2013. A news release was distributed and shared by local media (Hungry Horse News, Daily Inter Lake, and Flathead Beacon), and notification was sent to local conservation groups, legislators, and natural resource agencies. Copies of the EA were made available at local libraries, the state library in Helena, the MFWP Region 1 headquarters in Kalispell, and the MFWP internet web site. During the public comment period for the EA, FWP received comments from two groups and one individual. The comments included information seeking and statements of support, with no statements of opposition. Comments are described below with the numbers in parentheses following "Comment" representing the number of similar individual comments.

Comments on the South Fork of Coal Creek Habitat Enhancement Project

1 - Comment (1):

Controlling the temperature of water released from Hungry Horse Dam and reducing the lake trout in Flathead Lake would benefit juvenile bull trout.

Response:

FWP agrees that water temperature plays a critical role in the health of bull trout throughout the species' life cycle. However, no bull trout spawning currently or historically occurred in the Flathead in areas downstream of the dam and upstream of Flathead Lake. In other words, all spawning is upstream and unaffected by the temperature of water released from the dam. However, your point is still relevant because water temperatures directly impact productivity of insects, important food sources for bull trout and other fish. Fortunately, in the mid-1990s a selective withdrawal device was installed on the dam to mimic more normal seasonal temperature variation in the South Fork Flathead.

FWP acknowledges that interactions with introduced nonnative species have caused declines in native fish populations in the Flathead River system. Although lake trout have been shown to consume bull trout, that does not diminish the importance of

tributary habitat to the survival of the species. Habitat enhancement is one component of native species conservation.

2 - Comment (1):

The Flathead Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited applauds the Department for restoration efforts designed to improve spawning and rearing habitat for our wild and native fish populations.

Response:

FWP appreciates the support and voice of the Flathead Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

3 - Comment (1):

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) appreciate being notified of the proposed project and know of no cultural sites that may be impacted by the work.

Response:

FWP thanks the CSKT for its review and comment on our proposal.

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI):

Based on the comments FWP received during the public comment period for the draft EA of the South Fork of Coal Creek Habitat Enhancement Project, FWP has prepared the final EA for this project. No changes were made to the draft EA; therefore, the draft will become the final document. FWP believes that the proposed enhancement will benefit native fish with limited and short-term negative impacts to the surrounding environment. One comment in support for the preferred alternative was submitted. Two comments neither supporting nor opposing the project were submitted. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared, and I recommend that MFWP implement the proposed South Fork of Coal Creek Habitat Enhancement Project at this time.

James R. Satterfield, Jr.

7/1/13

James R. Satterfield Jr., Ph.D., Supervisor — Date
MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region One